

The Changing Face of Little Italy: The Miss Colombo Pageant and the Making of Ethnicity in Trail, British Columbia, 1970–1977

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine genre et ethnicité comme faisant partie de la même expérience sociale. Il fait valoir que le concours annuel "Miss Colombo" à Trail en Colombie-Britannique au début des années 70, de pair avec une campagne visant sa préservation à partir de 1973, offre un cadre genré unique pour comprendre la construction de l'ethnicité dans une petite municipalité. D'une manière générale, le concours reflète des changements spécifiques sociaux, économiques, spatiaux et culturels au sein de l'expérience locale italienne : un fort sentiment d'appartenance, la réussite professionnelle, le déplacement vers des quartiers ethniquement mixtes, et des relations positives avec les non Italiens. Ces processus se sont déroulés dans le forum paradoxal du concours de beauté, une institution paternelle qui célèbre et évalue le corps de jeunes femmes italiennes. N'ayant jamais contesté l'institution en soi, porteuse d'un déséquilibre de pouvoir entre les sexes, les femmes italiennes – tant bénévoles que candidates – ont travaillé dans le cadre du spectacle afin de promouvoir leur propre interprétation de l'appartenance italienne et de souscrire à une gamme de nouvelles possibilités pour elles-mêmes. Les femmes ont refait de façon spectaculaire, sans toutefois renverser, les structures genrées à travers lequel ces changements ont eu lieu, fait qui souligne la résilience du paternalisme dans le discours de l'appartenance ethnique.

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This article examines gender and ethnicity as part of the same social experience. It argues that the annual contest to crown Miss Colombo in Trail, British Columbia, during the first half of the 1970s, together with the campaign to preserve the beauty pageant after 1973, offers a unique gendered context to understand the making of ethnicity in a small city. Broadly speaking, the pageant reflected specific social, economic, spatial, and cultural changes within the local Italian experience: a strong sense of place, occupational success, movement to ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, and positive relations with non-Italians. These processes played out in a paradoxical forum of the Colombo pageant—a paternal institution that celebrated and evaluated young Italian women's bodies. Never contesting the institution itself, which carried a gendered power imbalance, Italian women—both as volunteers and contestants—worked through the pageant to promote their own interpretation of Italian belonging and to endorse a range of new possibilities for themselves. The women dramatically recast, but did not overturn, the gendered structures through which these changes took place—a pattern that points to the resiliency of paternalism in discourses of ethnic belonging.

Cet article examine genre et ethnicité comme faisant partie de la même expérience sociale. Il fait valoir que le concours annuel "Miss Colombo" à Trail en Colombie-Britannique au début des années 70, de pair avec une campagne visant sa préservation à partir de 1973, offre un cadre genré unique pour comprendre la construction de l'ethnicité dans une petite municipalité. D'une manière générale, le concours reflète des changements spécifiques sociaux, économiques, spatiaux et culturels au sein de l'expérience locale italienne : un fort sentiment d'appartenance, la réussite professionnelle, le déplacement vers des quartiers ethniquement mixtes, et des relations positives avec les non Italiens. Ces processus se sont déroulés dans le forum paradoxal du concours de beauté, une institution paternelle qui célèbre et évalue le corps de jeunes femmes italiennes. N'ayant jamais contesté l'institution en soi, porteuse d'un déséquilibre de pouvoir entre les sexes, les femmes italiennes – tant bénévoles que candidates – ont travaillé dans le cadre du spectacle afin de promouvoir leur propre interprétation de l'appartenance italienne et de souscrire à une gamme de nouvelles possibilités pour elles-mêmes. Les

femmes ont refait de façon spectaculaire, sans toutefois renverser, les structures genrées à travers lequel ces changements ont eu lieu, fait qui souligne la résilience du paternalisme dans le discours de l'appartenance ethnique.

In 1973 the Colombo Lodge in Trail, British Columbia, almost cancelled its annual queen pageant. Bedevilled by rivalries, suspicions, and accusations of foul play, the event attracted only a single contestant. Surprisingly, the dispute arose not among the young Italian¹ women eligible to participate but instead among their fathers who, interpreting a daughter's loss as an affront to their manhood, discouraged their daughters from competing. The effort of the Colombo men's lodge to preserve the competition, by asking the women from their affiliated Sisters of Colombo Lodge to select the candidates, set the stage for a major re-evaluation of the gendered character of Italian belonging in this small working-class city.

One year later, the honoured speaker at the Colombo Lodge men's banquet stepped up to the podium to put this gendered arrangement into perspective. After reminiscing about his childhood in Trail's Little Italy—noting, for example, that since moving to a larger centre he now paid for food his Italian mother had routinely made at home—he got to the main point of his address, the centrality of the family in Italian Trail. Repudiating popular stereotypes of domineering men and passive, submissive women, the speaker aimed to clarify the gendered division of power and place in ethnic Italian households. He explained, "The [Italian] man is the figurehead, but not the absolute. A woman has a subtle but powerful way of influence. Her place may be the kitchen, but it is the position of power . . . the men rule lousily so that women usually run the men and keep the family together. The fact is that the woman is the predominant character of Italian life."²

This statement fits with what Mary Douglas calls a semblance of social order, in which "the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against is exaggerated."³ The speaker's words put into colourful terms the putative links between an ethnic Italian woman, place, and responsibility: her place was the domestic sphere, but her duty was more broadly defined as the upkeep and social well-being of the family unit.

The Colombo Lodge queen pageant was a deeply gendered site of challenge and debate over Italian belonging and thus offers an excellent case study of the making of ethnicity in a small city. The near-collapse of the queen pageant in 1973 was a watershed in a six-year period (1970–1976), during which the demographic, economic, spatial, and cultural changes affecting Italians in Trail since the Second World War were played out on the bodies of young women. While Italians maintained a strong sense of place, their occupational success, movement into the new ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, more positive relations with non-Italians, and declining immigration from Italy all increased anxieties about the boundaries of local Italian ethnicity. This complex matrix provided the local framework for the contestation of gender norms, and the discourse of the queen contest was rife with contradictions reflecting the changes and anxieties of the day. In contrast to the pat gendered narrative provided by the guest speaker cited above, Italian women participated in the contest in ways that challenged more traditional notions of the separate spheres, yet conformed to a paternalistic structure. Curiously, the female contestants' bodies were celebrated and evaluated by the men of a fraternal society, and the Italian women involved, whether as volunteers or contestants, never contested their power or the pageant institution itself. Instead, they used the pageant to promote new interpretations of local Italian belonging and a wider range of possibilities for themselves. Even so, the Italian men held the upper hand in the making of a beauty queen, and their critical role in both the creation and dismantling of the pageant points to the endurance of paternalism in the face of urban change, the ethnic experience, and the making of gender categories.

The historical scholarship on Italians in Canada is extensive, perhaps more so than for any other ethnic group. Yet two decades after Gabrielle Scardellato observed, in the first study of Italians in British Columbia, that central Canada, and especially the popular Italian destinations of Montreal and Toronto, got the lion's share of attention, the geographical coverage, though much improved, remains uneven.⁴ While a continued interest in the large cities is warranted, and the literature on Italians in Canada written from the 1980s onward has included a growing number of works on Italian migration and settlement in locales across Canada,⁵ the experiences of Italians in small cities like Trail continue to be neglected. This is especially problematic for historians interested in examining the ways in which gender, ethnicity, class, and locality have intersected to help shape identity and community in smaller urban centres like Trail. The neglect is all the more glaring when we consider the important contributions of historians who have demonstrated the value of studying Italian ethnic identity-formation and sense of belonging through attention to gender and class, labour,⁶ or socialization,⁷ and those who have explored the making of ethnicity through event and social practice.⁸ By drawing on the insights of these and other more recent studies on ethnicity to post-1945 Trail, and considering them through the lens of a queen pageant, this essay makes an original contribution to the making of Italian ethnicity in a post-1945 small Canadian city that, in contrast to the big cities, was not seriously affected by the new influx of Italian immigrants.

This study of the queen pageants also makes an original contribution to the Italian Canadian historiography that, in contrast to that of the United States, has largely eschewed the serious scrutiny of ethnic symbolism in migrant communities. An exemplary public figure—in this case,

the beauty queen—is an ethnic symbol that reveals much about the ethno-cultural identity of both men and women. As April R. Schultz and Kathleen Neils Conzen and colleagues have noted, ethnic minorities in the United States often championed “giants” from the past—specifically, trans-oceanic explorers, renowned artists, and political figures—as a way of making a claim to respectability and political legitimacy.⁹ Beauty queens can be studied in the same light without falling into the trap of what Robert F. Harney called filiopietism. While he may have correctly noted that the identification of exemplary figures in Italian-Canadian history was a strategy adopted by the ethnic bourgeoisie to mute the experiences of humble migrants from the Italian countryside,¹⁰ he did not consider that less elite or non-elite figures, including beauty queens, could be taken up as exemplary ethnic figures. In Trail, Italian community leaders and members asserted and negotiated their place in Canadian society partly through the bodies of beauty queen contestants. It was Italian Canadians who selected the candidates from their local communities, challenged them to answer locally relevant questions, and elevated them, albeit temporarily, to iconic status as bearers of an ethnic ideal. Unlike exemplary symbols of the past, who are mute by virtue of their absence, beauty contestants are active participants in the making of ethnic categories. They are everyday figures, navigating local categories of knowledge about Italianness—the markers of Italian ethnicity at a particular place and time—as they seek to become Italian-Canadian queens.

The city of Trail¹¹ is located along the British Columbia–Washington border, roughly halfway between Vancouver and Calgary. A strong Italian presence in Trail dates back to its incorporation as a city in 1901. By 1911, the Italians, with a population of 373 persons, were the largest ethnic group in Trail, then a settlement of 1,460 residents.¹² In certain respects, the Italian experience in this city parallels that of Italians in other Canadian locales. As in the major centres, the vast majority of Italians came to Trail as unskilled workers and lived in segregated spaces, and many eventually achieved upward social mobility and became homeowners. Similarly, the “Little Italy” in Trail, as in big cities, retained its symbolic importance long after its original residents left it.¹³ But there were also significant differences between Trail and big cities like Toronto, and developments arising from Trail's small urban population shaped the local Italian experience in distinctive ways.

Generally speaking, Trail was part of two national demographic trends. The first is its position alongside other small cities in the history of Canadian urbanization. While many scholars have observed that Canada first became prominently urban by the 1931 Census, few address the fact that 41 per cent of urbanites lived in cities with fewer than thirty thousand residents.¹⁴ That the proportion remained relatively constant through to the 1951 Census suggests the early history of rural to urban migration is not a story of large centres rising at the expense of smaller ones. The pattern did change during the fifties, however, as the growth of large cities far outpaced that of the small ones. By 1971, cities with fewer than thirty thousand residents comprised just over 35 per cent of the national urban population.¹⁵ Trail was highly representative of this trend, its population falling 4 per cent between the 1961 and 1971 census years.¹⁶

The decline just described was related directly to a second demographic trend: Trail, like other cities of its size, was largely bypassed by

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post-1945 immigrants who flocked to cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Historically, Italian immigrants have always gravitated to the big Canadian cities, but the pattern was even more pronounced after the war. By 1971, 71 per cent of the Italian-born population lived in cities with more than half a million residents.¹⁷ In cities like Toronto, where by 1971 some 54 per cent of people of Italian descent were immigrants,¹⁸ the older ethnic communities struggled to accommodate the influx of compatriots, resulting eventually in the expansion and creation of churches, cultural centres, and business services. By contrast, postwar immigration had little impact on Trail. The 3,687 people in Trail who identified themselves as Italian in 1951 represented fully one-quarter of the total city population of 11,580. By 1961, the ethnic Italian population of the Trail region had increased only marginally to 3,778 people. At the same time, the number of Italian-born residents in Trail during this period grew from 1,477 to 2,262, an increase of 785 persons.¹⁹ Although significant numbers for a small city, these figures demonstrate that Trail was not the destination it had been for Italian migrants at the turn of the century, when the *Italian-born* comprised roughly 25 per cent of the city population.²⁰ By the tail end of postwar Italian immigration in 1971, the Italian ethnic population of Trail had fallen to 3,495, likely as a result of migration to urban centres such as Vancouver.²¹ The Italians of Trail thus faced a challenge in the postwar years that was different from that of their big city counterparts. With proportionally fewer new arrivals to support the expansion of cultural and social activities, the spectre of waning interest in formal Italian community life loomed large. The task for these predominantly second- and third-generation Italian Canadians was to keep valued forms of Italianness relevant in the face of assimilating forces. Such anxieties were played on the bodies of the young ethnic Italian women who participated in the Colombo Lodge queen pageant.

The small size and remote location of Trail also had a direct bearing on the types of formal bonds possible among Italian ethnics.²² In her study of pre-First World War Jewish settlers in Pennsylvania, Ewa Morawska argues that small towns are more conducive to fostering ethnic identities than major cities for several reasons, including the existence of stronger social networks, greater visibility and thus fewer options of “exiting” the ethnic group, and the enhanced value placed on good relations with the dominant WASP population.²³ All of these factors operated in Trail, along with another important one directly related to the Italian Canadians. In contrast to the longstanding antagonisms that existed among Italians of different regions in various New World locales, Trail’s Italian population, though regionally diverse in origin, was never large enough to support many town- or region-based Italian associations, thereby ensuring that formal bonds were primarily pan-Italian.²⁴

The predominant Italian institution in Trail was always the pan-Italian Colombo Lodge. Established in 1905, it now claims to be the oldest surviving ethnic Italian society in Canada. During the sixties and seventies it boasted roughly 1,100 members—more than one in three adult Italians in the city of Trail.²⁵ The lodge was the centre of secular Italian activity.²⁶ In 1924 women from the lodge formed their own separate society called the Sisters of Colombo. The two lodges enjoyed an atmosphere of goodwill and mutual respect, but while they shared the same building, they came together only at special events, such as picnics, banquets, and the queen pageants. The existence of the two



Colombo Lodge Archives, Trail, BC

Shawn Paolone, Miss Colombo Lodge 1972. A queen’s gown, sash, crown, and cape were not superfluous pretensions to royalty. They declared her status as the embodied representative of the lodge and, by extension, most of the city’s Italian residents.

pan-Italian lodges suggests that the limited size of Trail predisposed Italians to shed regional antagonisms for the sake of institutional efficacy. Even the few groups organized along hometown or regional identities retained their membership in the pan-Italian lodges.²⁷ Trail Italians were also historically isolated from the ethnic media and the Italian consular officials based in larger centres and were little affected by the growth of these industries after the early 1970s. All of these factors played a critical role in shaping Italian ethnicity in Trail, BC.

The Colombo lodge held pan-Italian memberships, but there were key gender differences in how the men’s lodge and the Sisters of Colombo defined Italian belonging, as evidenced in their different ethnic criteria for membership. The men limited membership to males of Italian paternal descent, while the women admitted females who had *either* an Italian father or Italian mother. If we return to the typology presented by the guest speaker at the 1974 men’s banquet, the woman might have represented the “predominant character of Italian life,” but the male was indeed still the “figurehead” and more. According to the men’s lodge, Italian ethnic pedigree was passed down through an Italian male. An

Italian woman, though central to family life, simply could not bear an Italian child without an Italian male partner. Since the two lodges enjoyed independent status, no one questioned the other's membership criteria, that is, until the mid-1970s, when a crisis in the queen pageant forced male organizers to share the selection process with the Sisters.

This pageant crisis needs also to be understood within the context of the occupational profile of Trail's Italians and the space they had occupied in the city since the turn of the century. In a working-class community dominated by the Consolidated Mining and Smelting plant (later Teck Cominco), even to this day, the livelihood of Italians has always been closely tied to male wages earned in dangerous jobs. The smelter took on even greater prominence in the 1920s, as operations at the Canadian Pacific rail yards diminished and the nearby Rossland gold and copper mines closed. Large numbers of Italians worked together at the CM&S plant, often comprising entire work teams. In addition, most Italians lived nearby, in "the Gulch," a working-class area located on a steep mountain slope close to the mining and smelter operations, which made walking possible even in inclement winter weather. The neighbourhood's boarding houses offered cheap accommodation for new arrivals.

A local Italian community soon thrived in the Gulch, Trail's de facto "Little Italy," and this tight-knit and "self-sustaining" Italian community existed for more than fifty years. Italians in Trail lived, worked, and celebrated together. They did not need to venture outside the Gulch for essential services. By the time of the Second World War, Rossland Avenue, the main thoroughfare, was still supporting more than twenty Italian businesses.²⁸ Italian children attended the nearby elementary and secondary schools, and practising Roman Catholics attended mass each Sunday at St. Anthony's Parish. A great-grandson of the first Italian migrant in Trail, George Georgetti grew up in the Gulch during the 1950s and remembers it in idyllic terms, noting the annual family tradition of winemaking and the streets filled with Italian homes, each boasting a large vegetable garden.²⁹ An Italian immigrant society created and nurtured in a New World, the Gulch also reflected the reinvention of the pre-migration institution of *comparaggio* or ritual kinship, which "incorporated into the family friends encountered at work, in the neighbourhood, or through the church, by giving them familial status as ritual *compare* or godparents."³⁰ One former resident who grew up there during the 1930s recalled that its social "grapevine" was so efficient that his parents already knew what mischief he had been up to on any given night before he arrived home.³¹

The segregated Italian settlement in the Gulch also symbolized in space the geographic and economic divisions in the city of Trail before the 1970s. Working-class Italians lived on the west bank of the Columbia River, across from the Anglo-Saxon neighbourhoods to the east. There were ethnic and class distinctions at the smelter as well. Following Italy's declaration of war against Great Britain and her allies on 10 June 1940, the general manager at Cominco called a meeting at the Colombo Lodge, where he promised to "protect" Italian workers if they surrendered their hunting and sport rifles to their superiors. Everyone complied the following morning.³² But such gestures hardly protected Italian labourers from dangerous work; in 1923 and 1924 alone, for example, three Italian immigrants died from workplace disasters.³³ And, according to both Anglo and Italian Trailers, anti-Italian discrimination at the workplace continued long after the Second World War.

Al King, an English immigrant who worked at the smelter, recalled in his memoirs that as late as the mid-1960s "the workers who got the dirtiest, crappiest jobs were the Italians."³⁴ Similarly, Buddy Devito, King's contemporary and an Italian worker who later became mayor of Trail, recalled that "the [Italian] immigrants were put upon a lot in Trail. . . . The Company (CM&S) was owned by the CPR, which was British capital, and practically all the staff—if not all the staff—were English or Scotch. The Scotch were more the tradesmen, and they were the foremen and shift bosses in the plants, and there was considerable chauvinism, racism, at that time. . . . Most of us Italian kids had a strong anti-British attitude."³⁵

Aware of their vulnerable status, Italians as a rule did not participate in union politics; for them, the risks associated with a solidarity movement were too great.³⁶ Objects of workplace discrimination, suspicion, and intimidation, Italian labourers bore a heavier social burden than their non-Italian counterparts. Mistreated as a *group*, they turned to their own institutions, especially the Colombo Lodge, for social and financial security—a response that reinforced the strong sense of Italian community.³⁷

The Colombo queen pageants of the 1970s followed a period of significant change and transition within Italian Trail. Italian residents found themselves in a new relationship with their urban environment. Paradoxically, they enjoyed a more prominent place in civic life, but risked "losing ground" because of demographic, spatial, and cultural change. As mentioned earlier, the postwar Italian immigration to Canada that so dramatically altered the Italian populations in large cities had little impact on Italians in Trail, which experienced a small influx of Italian newcomers. As the demographics of Italian life shifted, so too did the group's relations with other residents. By the 1970s the Italian community in Trail was no longer economically and spatially marginalized. Rising wages during the 1950s meant that the livelihood of Italian workers had improved dramatically. Additionally, significant numbers of Italians working at the smelter moved into management positions by the 1970s—a pattern that marked the end of older discriminatory hiring practices. The guest speaker at the Colombo Lodge anniversary dinner in 1975, for example, was an Italian Canadian who had become general manager at Cominco.³⁸ As the upwardly mobile residents of the Gulch began moving to more upscale multi-ethnic neighbourhoods on the town's periphery, setting in motion a pattern of ethnic flight, the once-thriving business district along Rossland Avenue entered into a long period of decline until, by the 1990s, only one store, the Star Grocery, remained.³⁹ The Colombo Lodge and the much smaller Italo-Canadese Lodge continued their operations, but apart from these buildings, the Gulch was an Italian space only in memory.

Italian social and economic gains were accompanied by a new atmosphere of inclusion in the city of Trail. Tony Morelli, the bartender at many Colombo Lodge functions since the early 1970s, recalls that the lodge also began to receive special treatment from the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police branch in the mid-1970s. He remembers the day he drove to the station to request a liquor permit for an upcoming Sunday festival at the lodge. Initially concerned about the legal and social implications of granting an alcohol licence on the Sabbath, when liquor stores were closed, the RCMP officer "checked the book [of police records] and then said, 'Colombo Lodge, seventy years without

a problem. If I don't give you a permit I'm an asshole. If I do, then I'm an asshole all the same. Tell you what, you have your party and I won't send police up there."⁴⁰ By the 1970s, Tony Morelli and other Italians in Trail were aware of their reputation as model citizens.

Beginning in 1969, the City invited the Colombo Lodge to participate in its annual festival and parade, and the lodge leaders responded by welcoming non-Italians to their spaghetti dinners and other special occasions. Smaller Italian clubs and lodges followed with annual wine-tasting contests, cabaret dinners featuring northeastern Italian cuisine, and decorative floats for civic parades.⁴¹ The blurring lines between civic and Italian culture were analogous to the disappearance of a spatially and economically defined Italian community. It is no coincidence, then, that the guest speaker at the 1974 Colombo Lodge banquet quoted earlier waxed nostalgic about his childhood in the 1950s. The presenter at the following year's dinner did likewise, calling out to many of his former neighbours in the crowd by their school nicknames.⁴² It was becoming increasingly clear in Italian Trail that something was being lost in the process of social and economic integration.

Paralleling these many changes were changes in the gender dynamics of Trail's Italian families and community. Most Italian migrants to Trail, both before and after the Second World War, had come as unskilled or semi-skilled workers from the Italian countryside, and they brought with them the gendered norms that helped order everyday life, including those related to place and duty.⁴³ Significantly, oral testimonies do not reveal a consensus about these arrangements in postwar Trail. On the one hand, conservative strictures certainly still existed. One beauty queen participant explained that during the fifties, the Sisters of Colombo meetings were among the few locations outside of the home where Italian women could socialize. "The ladies were at home," she recalled, "and therefore didn't have the opportunities their husbands had to learn the language," adding, "in those days Italian women didn't have many outside connections. Many of us were illiterate, even the president (of the ladies' lodge) at one time!"⁴⁴ Allana Tognotti, a second-generation Italian Canadian who was a teenager during the sixties, remembers that the immigrant mothers of most of her friends did in fact know English but they too were homemakers, save for the widows and the few women who worked as seamstresses in their living rooms.⁴⁵ Many Italian mothers, presumably both first- and second-generation Canadian, made great efforts to regulate the activities of their daughters. Co-ed events at the lodge, for example, ensured that young ethnic Italian women confronted the opposite gender in a regulated setting. At lodge dances during the 1960s, a step along both walls of the hall physically and psychologically reinforced a "proper" distance between males and females. The boys sat at one end of the room, while the girls, closely chaperoned by their mothers, peered over at them from the other side. A brave male thus underwent a three-stage process to secure a dance partner. He had to cross the dance floor, secure the mother's blessing, and then gain the consent of the female partner herself.⁴⁶

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that some second- and third-generation Italian-Canadian women enjoyed more social freedom than that permitted at the lodge. In 1954, a small group of postwar Italian male immigrants formed Club Italico because, as one of its founders explained, they had immigrated as youngsters and felt

they had "different attitudes and values" from those of the Canadian old-timers who came during the 1920s, and thus organized on their own.⁴⁷ Ironically, then, these most recent arrivals from Italy considered themselves more modern than those who had arrived much earlier and become accustomed to "the Canadian way of life." While Club Italico may have operated only in Italian (the Colombo Lodge by this time operated in both English and Italian),⁴⁸ its members had less conservative views on the social mixing of genders as evidenced by the types of activities they hosted. Although membership was restricted to men of Italian descent, during the 1960s women were invited to fill female roles for their theatre performances.⁴⁹ Club Italico also hosted Italian film nights. Movies were shipped via Greyhound bus from Vancouver to Trail and screened at the local cinema. Both events were regulated by a co-ed community of peers, unlike functions at the Colombo Lodge, where older generations were in a better position to regulate their daughters' activities.

Social activities also extended outside of formal ethnic functions. Second-generation Italian Canadian Doreen Meschi remembers that during the mid-1960s "you could get your food and company at the Lodge or the Elks (a local fraternal organization)."⁵⁰ The social life for Doreen and her friends expanded beyond the lodge and the parish to include dances held by inter-ethnic civic groups. Clearly, then, by the 1960s gendered social arrangements among Italians in Trail were contested. The comment by the speaker at the 1974 lodge banquet that an ethnic Italian woman's place "may be the kitchen" thus appears highly prescriptive and out of step with everyday practice. This contestation would play itself out in the beauty queen pageants.

Recent research suggests that beauty pageants are North American in origin. They did not take place in Italy until after the Second World War, and more importantly, not until the influx of American film, consumer products, and advertising, and the Italian equivalents that followed.⁵¹ However, Italian migrants in Canada hosted beauty pageants before this time. Ray Culos, for example, has documented their presence in Vancouver since the 1930s. Their popularity has endured to the present day. Toronto hosts an annual Miss Woodbridge Italia competition. A young woman is chosen each year to represent Canada at the much-hyped Miss Italia in the World Pageant.⁵² Additionally, regional Italian groups, particularly the Calabrese, continue to crown club representatives, many going on to compete in Italy itself against those from the same diaspora. The Colombo Lodge in Trail first hosted an annual beauty pageant in 1934, suggesting that arrivals there, like their compatriots in larger cities, adopted this mode of celebrating and staging femininity from the host culture.⁵³ Unfortunately, scant records survive of Colombo Lodge contests before the 1970s. Our study is therefore limited to archival fonds for the years 1970 to 1977 and oral testimonies.

Separate from the Colombo pageant was the annual Miss Trail competition. The title at this function went to the girl with the most tickets sold in her name. The men at the lodge infrequently sponsored one of their own daughters to compete for the civic crown, six of them winning the contest between 1938 and 1978.⁵⁴ The victors were often sent to Vancouver to compete with other civic ambassadors. For Lodi Forte, Miss Trail in 1951, this was her first time away from home. Unlike the ticket-based criteria in Trail, the provincial event was styled as a traditional beauty contest. Forte explained that judges chose a winner

"just by watching us, by how we presented ourselves."⁵⁵ Young ethnic Italian women, however, did not participate in the Trail contest regularly. The Colombo Lodge pageant was the only institution where females competed annually to represent the local ethnic ideal.

The Miss Colombo pageant during the 1970s does not appear to have been directly influenced by feminist protests against beauty contests raging elsewhere in North America. Oral and written sources in Trail do not indicate any controversy over the contest's appropriateness as a stage for Italian-Canadian femininity.⁵⁶ Looking back, all of those interviewed in this study—former judges, chaperones, contestants, and onlookers—cast the pageant in a positive light. Explained one chaperone, "We always asked four or five girls to compete. They said 'yes' and loved it. They had a great time."⁵⁷ Another added, "It was all positive, really good for the girls. Most that ran were just a group of friends."⁵⁸ Contestants agreed. Nilla Cescon, Miss Colombo 1973, fondly remembers receiving the crown from the previous year's queen, a close friend. She credits the pageant with increasing her confidence and ability to speak in public, two qualities that helped her when she ran for Miss Trail two years later.⁵⁹ Similarly, Rhonda Huth, who won the contest in 1977 (the second half-Italian by maternal origin to take the crown), made friendships with the other four competitors. More important, she ended up marrying the "nice young Italian boy" who escorted her to the stage.⁶⁰ Even contestants who did not win the Miss Colombo pageant expressed similar sentiments. Allana Tognotti, who ran in the 1969 competition, explains, "It was a great way to learn public speaking and to be part of what the men's and ladies' lodges were doing. One of the men asked me to run. Of course, it was an honour."⁶¹

The Colombo Lodge queen pageant was a fraternal institution that exalted the local Italian feminine ideal. Young Italian-Canadian women's bodies became, in the words of Robert H. Lavenda, "forums for public debate on who constituted a proper representative" of the group.⁶² The parameters for this public debate were primarily set by the men's lodge, which sponsored, coordinated, and regulated the pageant. Interviews with former participants reveal a consensus about the gendered arrangement of duties. A former president of the Sisters of Colombo described it as "a joint venture [in which] the men supplied money for gowns and things and the women did all the 'girlie' things."⁶³ A male volunteer was more candid. He admitted that, apart from providing judges, "the men's lodge didn't have a great deal to do with the pageant other than things like building a parade float. The Sisters did most of the—should I say—'lady-like' things—teas, chaperoning, and decorating."⁶⁴ As it was in the household division of labour, female volunteers were the "predominant characters" of the pageant, both as contestants and as volunteers, while the men, through their rather distant sponsorship, remained the "figureheads."

Despite their limited practical role, the men decided who was aesthetically, ethnically, and morally fit to be Miss Colombo. At least until 1976, they personally handpicked the young women who competed. Their decisions were based on rather nondescript criteria, considering that there could be only four or five competitors each year. A judge's evaluation sheet from the early seventies explained that an eligible contestant had to be "a young woman between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, not married or engaged, the daughter of a member of the Men's Colombo Lodge, and in good standing."⁶⁵ Thus, the candidate

was thought to carry in her body innocence, a quality that exempted her from the corruptions of adult society, but also signified her potential as a mother. Given the size of the lodge, many young Italian-Canadian women in Trail would have fit these criteria. The "good standing" prerequisite thus discloses a number of assumptions. That certain girls were chosen from a presumably large field suggests that the power and influence of certain individuals at the lodge was, for better or worse, a factor in the selection.

The contest itself took place at five separate functions over a three-month period, culminating in the Queen's Ball.⁶⁶ The girls delivered speeches before both lodges, served tea and desserts to a room full of local dignitaries—including the anonymous contest judges—and until the mid-1970s participated as models in a fashion show.⁶⁷ Judges were selected from the men's lodge, the identities of each remaining a secret throughout the competition. The attributes that made a contestant a role model of Italian femininity had to be learned. The characteristics that prepared her for motherhood—domesticity, restraint, and poise—could not be taught or learned by men, but ironically, they were evaluated by men. Before this assessment took place, an older and prominent member of the Sisters of Colombo groomed the girls. This "chaperone" taught her charge how to carry herself in a manner befitting an Italian-Canadian queen. This training included etiquette training, speech writing, and learning to speak with poise. The reigning queen became the ambassador of the lodge during her reign: she sat in parades, conducted volunteer work, and, at the end of her tenure, placed her crown on the head of the next recipient.⁶⁸ Upon completion of her term, she was formally presented with a jewellery box and a cash gift.⁶⁹

The Colombo Lodge tried to disassociate itself from negative connotations associated with a beauty pageant by calling it a "queen contest." In so doing, they joined a chorus of other competitions, such as the Miss Canada and Miss America pageants.⁷⁰ Robert H. Lavenda explains that queen contests, unlike beauty pageants, look not for the most physically attractive candidate, but rather a community representative—someone who best articulates notions of exemplary citizenship.⁷¹ The ambassadorial role of Miss Colombo certainly fit this description; however, the inseparability of physical attributes from the selection process meant that beauty, however interpreted, was a central feature of the best "all-round" candidate. As Patrizia Gentile notes, queen pageants are hybrids of beauty pageants: they share the same web of cultural meanings practised by their "l Lewder" sisters.⁷² The difference between the two merits a disclaimer, but not a distinction.

The criteria used to determine the winner were subjective in this regard. A judge's ballot from the early 1970s rated the contestant according to eight categories, each given equal weight: beauty of face, beauty of figure, charm (poise, etc.), personality, posture, dress (choice of), sincerity, and speaking ability. Ten bonus points were awarded to girls who were competent in Italian.⁷³ Two important conclusions can be drawn from this source. First, the allocation of equal weight to each category suggests that, at least on paper, judges were looking for the best "all-round" Italian-Canadian beauty queen.⁷⁴ Thus, to borrow the words of gender historian Sarah Banet-Weiser, the Italian-Canadian beauty contestant "weaved desirability with respectability and sexuality with morality."⁷⁵ Although the categories are presented as distinct from one another, most

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of the qualities are intimately linked to beauty.⁷⁶ Personality, posture, dress, sincerely, and to a lesser extent speaking ability—each deals with how a woman “carries” herself. In the queen pageant, as in other beauty pageants, bodily attractiveness is integrated with notions of character.

The types of questions asked of the entrants at the 1974 Queen's Ball—the last and decisive event of the contest—most powerfully situated prospective queens in the role of community representative. These questions signalled a community in transition. The questions were created by the head chaperone, but read by the male judges.⁷⁷ This interesting arrangement permitted leading, even controversial, queries about the role of an “Italian” woman in Trail. The men asked the questions, but an older female (the chaperone) “set up” the girls to consider new possibilities for themselves. The chaperones during these years were middle-aged, second-generation Italian Canadians; thus the question period encapsulated the gender and social roles that an older generation of ethnic Italians imagined for their daughters.

In 1974, the candidates were called upon to speak as ethnic Italian women—the “central figures” in the community—at a time when the local ethnic community no longer resembled its former self. The list of questions included:

1. In a relationship would you consider a domineering partner a sign of weakness?
2. Why would a woman want to be addressed as “Ms.”?
3. What would you advise your teenage daughter in this day and age?
4. How does TV influence your life?
5. Is it important for a girl to have a college education?
6. How would you describe Canada to a visiting foreigner?

And most perplexing:

7. Why do you want to go to the moon?⁷⁸

The first three enquiries suggest a tension within the local Italian community between an ethnic Italian woman's more traditional function as family custodian (as expressed by the speaker at the 1974 lodge banquet) and more modern possibilities. Contestants were prompted to address patriarchy in a critical light by pointing out circumstances in which the over-protectiveness of a male partner is a negative quality. In the second question about being addressed as “Ms.,” the young women were asked to consider a title independent of “belonging” (Mrs.) or “not belonging” (Miss) to a man. It is worth noting that contestants were not asked what they thought of Ms. as a form of address, but rather why a woman would prefer this moniker. “Ms.” was being proposed at that time by second-wave feminists such as Sheila Michaels and Gloria Steinem as the feminine equivalent of “Mr.” The title was highly controversial in the English-speaking world during the 1970s. That it was conceived as an appropriate query in the Miss Colombo pageant suggests that the female chaperone posing the questions wished to enter certain second-wave feminist themes into the local discussion of Italian ethnicity. The third question, by forcing the contestant to provide moral answers to issues facing Italian-Canadian adolescents, repositioned young women in the traditional role of family custodian. The phrase “in



Colombo Lodge Archives, Trail, BC

Previous year's queen Donna Tognotti pins a corsage on Nella Cescon, Miss Colombo Lodge 1971, at the Queen's Ball. The outgoing queen concluded her duties with a farewell speech, then placed her crown on the head of the next winner, symbolizing through this exchange a level of continuity among those selected to represent Italian Trail.

this day in age” suggests that innovative strategies—beyond those used by their ethnic Italian parents—were necessary in this pedagogical role.

Whereas the first three questions dealt with familial relations, the latter three addressed an “Italian” woman's role in public. The contestants were to consider the value of post-secondary education, when just two decades earlier many of the Sisters of Colombo were illiterate and their daughters were under heavy surveillance at lodge dances. The prospect of higher education for a young Italian-Canadian woman in Trail was particularly novel at this time. In fact, it was even uncommon for an ethnic Italian male. In 1971 no more than 165 Italian ethnics in British Columbia (of a population of 13,890) boasted a university degree.⁷⁹ Trail lacked a post-secondary institution before the establishment of a satellite campus for Selkirk College decades later, so college or university attendance meant leaving the family abode. A young woman attending university would also find herself beyond the watchful eye of mothers and the local Italian community. “Going to the moon,” while a

presumptuous question, proposed a major extension of public activities for local Italian-Canadian girls. The practical requirements of becoming an astronaut pointed to a scale of ambition that could carry an Italian-Canadian woman far beyond Trail, the kitchen, or the queen contest.

The question of higher education also implied acceptance of the place of ethnic Italian women in the formal workforce—a controversial notion because it challenged the Italian male breadwinner norm. In 1971, only 1,393 women of Italian descent in British Columbia were part of the labour force, compared to 7,639 of their male counterparts.⁸⁰ However, interviews with local subjects indicate that the proportion of working women of Italian descent in Trail may have been higher. “The most active [female] members in the lodge during the fifties were housewives,” explained Norma Caputo, whereas “those during the 1970s were working mothers.”⁸¹ Lola Hanlon, of the same generation, offers an interesting twist: “Most of our mothers wanted us to become educated, as long as we stayed in our hometown [thereafter].”⁸² University education was promoted, but only insofar as it provided opportunities for daughters to return to Trail. The mothers were participants in the workforce, who wished for even greater educational and economic success for their daughters, but still felt a strong maternal instinct to protect them well into their adult years.

The query about watching television suggests that sources of entertainment other than lodge events were available. Television, in particular, offered a leisure alternative and potential threat to lodge functions. The chaperone presenting the question also wanted to know to what extent the messages imbedded in these broadcasts and the time spent consuming them were affecting young Italian-Canadian women. Unlike some of the other questions, this one is not particularly leading or moral in connotation. It asks for description rather than judgment. Television is not assumed to be something negative. The contestants are not asked how many hours of programming they watch each day. The chaperone appears to be sounding out the attitudes and perceptions of youth.

The sixth question—describing Canada to a visiting foreigner—required the contestant to speak as a Canadian and on behalf of Canadians, rather than only as an “Italian.” The inquiry took place only a year after Prime Minister Trudeau declared Canada to be a “multicultural society”—a move that suggests that the chaperone-writer perceived a political and social atmosphere of inclusion in which Italian and Canadian identities were simultaneously possible. The question is consistent with Patrizia Gentile’s observation that the ethnic beauty queen “becomes essentially an ethnic and gendered representation of the Canadian nation.”⁸³ It implied that Italians were bona fide Canadians. A third identity—being from Trail—was added to the list in 1976, but in a very different format. The foreigner in this case was an Italian. One contestant was asked, “If somebody from Italy came to our community, what kinds of things would you say about Trail?”⁸⁴ The question alludes to the links between space and Italian belonging. Placed in the role of civic ambassador, the contestant was prompted to articulate what was distinct about Trail, *her* home, to someone only familiar with the Italian peninsula.

In addition to the spot questions, the girls addressed their audience in the local newspaper and at speeches before the two lodges. They acted reflexively in these forums, reading the climate of Italian

community opinion and responding accordingly. Their profiles in the newspaper suggest an Italian ethnic community in transition: there were new ways for a local young woman to present herself as “Italian.” In 1974 the *Trail Daily Times* carried short personal biographies of each participant. One girl explained that she was “a regular at Trail Smoke Eaters [hockey] games at the Cominco Arena,” and another wrote that she “especially enjoy[ed] cooking and plan[ned] to take up secretarial work and later take a trip to Italy.”⁸⁵ The first based her suitability as an “Italian” queen by linking ethnic identity and civic pride. The Smoke Eaters have a long and storied history, including two amateur world championships in 1939 and 1961.⁸⁶ The contestant’s choice to identify with the Smoke Eaters indicates that she perceived Italian identity and civic culture as complementary. Her freedom to attend a non-Italian function—and choice to share this information during her candidacy for Miss Colombo—suggests that by this time less importance was being placed on community surveillance of young Italian-Canadian women.

The other competitor identified herself with the Old World roles of cooking and knowing her ancestral roots, but also with the modern option of entering the workforce—albeit in an occupation most often taken by women. Still, the statement reflected new paths: at this time only eighty women of Italian descent in British Columbia worked in the clerical profession, even though this was the most common position for Canadian women in general.⁸⁷ By comparison, housekeeping and seamstressing were the most frequent occupations of Italian women in the province.⁸⁸ The girl’s preference for a job most popular with her non-Italian peers indicates that she perceived a new level of accommodation with the dominant culture. She saw new opportunities open to Italian women and found it advantageous to note them in her campaign.

The speeches of pageant contestants, read before both men’s and women’s lodges, articulated similar positions. The 1977 queen had just recently moved from Vancouver to Trail, the hometown of her parents. She began her address with a tribute to her Italian mother and listed her involvement in lodge and school activities. She expressed a desire to be a kindergarten teacher, shared her maternal relatives’ memories of life in the Gulch, and stated her renewed appreciation for Trail. Although neither she nor her mother spoke Italian, she concluded her address with formal greetings in the language.⁸⁹ In an effort to read the climate of what lodge members and judges considered the Italian feminine ideal, she and the other girls strategically concluded that it was a balance of Italian immigrant and ethnic values and practices easily identified with the Gulch, with modern modifications (education, entering the workforce) and civic pride.

As the Miss Colombo pageant operated during the 1970s as a nuanced discussion of Italian femininity, it was also collapsing because of internal political quarrels. While the changing ethnic markers of Italian Trail were mediated through young women’s bodies, a broader debate emerged in the same forum about the gendered character of local Italian belonging. The catalyst was the judging process. Many fathers regarded a loss by their daughter with suspicion, some suggesting that the social connections of the winning girl’s father, and not her own “merits,” determined her fate. The small urban setting of Trail—where the contestants and their fathers were well known—heightened the sense of competition and social repercussions of the pageant’s outcome. Most people knew the “pretty girls” and their fathers—a reality that had direct

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bearing on the latter's reputation. Tony Morelli explains that "some of the members used to get bad. They said, 'Why didn't my daughter win? She speaks Italian.' They would get mad and stop coming to meetings or volunteering if their daughters didn't win."⁹⁰ Ironically, the voting process had been revised a half-decade earlier during the late sixties to prevent rivalries. Before then, winners had been determined by the number of tickets sold to the Queen's Ball on their behalf. This system, one woman recounted, was prone to elitism: "A father could just plunk down a lot of money [by purchasing multiple tickets] and his daughter would win."⁹¹ Strangely, the contest still went through the motions of selecting a queen. The new judging scheme placed the outcome of the contest beyond the direct control of the wealthy fathers, but the reforms did little to temper accusations of foul play.

The uproar revealed the paradoxical nature of the Colombo queen pageant: at a forum where Italian femininities were debated, masculinities were most threatened. A former chaperone candidly explained that the men, not their daughters, took defeat the hardest.⁹² She recalled that the girls chosen by the men's lodge were still eager to compete, but their fathers discouraged them from entering the contest.⁹³ The men's reaction says much about their perception of the links among patriarchy, social status, and shame. One of the Sisters of Colombo recalled, "The pageant created times of animosity between certain families in the Italian community."⁹⁴ For a father, male protector, and household head, a pageant loss was an unflattering commentary on his masculinity. A win or loss altered his reputation within a highly networked local ethnic community.

Despite accusations to the contrary, pageant organizers went to great lengths to project impartiality. The 1970 event program, for example, assured spectators that "the woman is chosen by 5 anonymous judges, judged impartially on her merits." It added that "the judges are known only by the committee and have no connections whatsoever to this contest."⁹⁵ The uproar reached a fever pitch in 1973, when fathers uniformly dissuaded their daughters from participating in the Colombo queen pageant. The crisis was a coup within the men's lodge: officials were asking girls to compete in the face of obstinate fathers. Only one candidate, Nilla Cescon, stepped forward and accepted the crown by default. She dutifully fulfilled her responsibilities, carrying out speeches and volunteer work; however, there were no spot questions at the Queen's Ball or a fashion show.⁹⁶

The situation prompted an impassioned appeal from the president of the men's lodge to his membership: "Have you noticed something missing at the latest Colombo banquet? Something sparkling, shiny, colourful and bright? . . . the Colombo queen has only a few simple words to say but when she gets up to speak and stumbles over her few simple words and possibly chokes on a tear or two the audience loves her and show [sic] her by giving her a great round of applause."⁹⁷

Clearly, Cescon's crowning meant that a queen was not "missing" at the banquet. The president's disappointment in the lack of participants drove him to hyperbole. Discursively speaking, his words expressed as much about beauty queens and Italian femininity as his own views on Italian masculinity. The men carried the major decisions in this arrangement; the young women, by contrast, were valued for their appearance, presentation, and few but well-placed words—their "subtle but powerful



Nilla Cescon, Miss Colombo Lodge 1973 (cousin of Nella Cescon, Miss Colombo 1971). Nilla was the only contestant that year because of infighting among the fathers at the lodge.

ways of influence," to recall the 1974 banquet speaker. Their inability to conceal their emotions only reinforced their subordinate position as the weaker gender. The potential loss of the Colombo Lodge queen pageant was therefore acutely disruptive because it threatened the status of Italian men. Ironically, when the jealous fathers, guided by paternalistic zeal, acted to protect their daughters' honour, they were actually working to dismantle a paternalistic ethnic institution.

The next year saw only two contenders, an even worse disaster in the eyes of chaperon Anne Gagliani. She explains, "Right then I knew, and so did the committee, that we were in for trouble. Two girls running was not a good number." More vexing, the girls were "well matched," and both came from prominent Italian families.⁹⁸ The judging process was now under greater scrutiny. Shockingly, one judge seized the opportunity to clandestinely display his allegiance to one girl's father and family. He gave her a "10" in every category and the other a "0," thereby sabotaging the entire process. The announcement of the winner at the Queen's Ball elicited loud protests from people in the crowd, who

suspected partiality. The father of the runner-up was especially upset. He had already planned a post-pageant celebration for his daughter.⁹⁹

The 1975 fiasco did little to redeem the pageant's image in Trail's Italian community. In an effort to revive the contest, the two chaperones developed a new strategy: the daughters of the Sisters of Colombo would be permitted to compete in the pageant. They submitted their proposal to the men's executive, who consented, and then passed the motion at the next Sisters' meeting.¹⁰⁰ However, by encouraging mothers of Italian descent to ask their daughters to participate, the men wittingly set the stage for a major confrontation over who was "Italian" in Trail. As noted earlier, unlike the men's lodge, the Sisters of Colombo based their membership on Italian patrilineage or matrilineage. In their constitution, a woman was Italian through a biological link to an Italian mother, regardless of the ethnic origins of her father.¹⁰¹ Given this glaring discrepancy, it is likely that the men's lodge foresaw a debate over Italian belonging. Their acquiescence to the chaperones' recommendation is all the more vexing—perhaps a sign of their desperation to save the pageant.

The stage was set for a major confrontation in the year 1976, when Laura Creegan, a girl with an ethnic Italian mother and ethnic Irish father, enlisted in the pageant. The Sisters unanimously supported her candidacy for Miss Colombo. The men saw the situation differently. Many opposed Creegan's participation on the basis that her father was not of Italian descent. In their view, a woman was "the predominant character of Italian life," but only if she had an Italian father and an Italian surname. Interestingly, one year earlier a queen contestant performed a Polish dance at the talent competition without eliciting a complaint.¹⁰² Her act, though "un-Italian," did not compromise her Italian ethnicity because her father was ethnically Italian.

An active member of the men's lodge remembers the dispute clearly. He explained that Creegan's father was "better than some Italians. You feel sorry [for him] because he couldn't join the lodge. Some guys used to say, 'The Italian fathers are members and the building [shared with the Sisters] belongs to the men. The ladies don't pay the rent; we pay the taxes for this building.'"¹⁰³

This statement offers a rich and telling assessment of the situation. The man's empathy was first and foremost with the young girl's father, who was dishonoured by the regulations. Because he was not Italian, Mr. Creegan was not permitted to attend the Queen's Ball and thus observe his daughter's coronation. Moreover, his ethnic background excluded him from participating in the lodge's extensive social network. "Better than some Italians" suggests that certain Italian men were not living up to a moral standard the interviewee thought was met by Mr. Creegan, a non-Italian and non-lodge member. More generally, the critics' reactions fell in line with their more traditional role as family breadwinners, extended here from the household division of labour to the city's largest Italian institution. As bearers of the club purse, they saw themselves in a position to direct the local boundaries of Italian belonging.

Creegan, only fifteen years old at the time, was acutely aware about her controversial ethnic status. Like other pageant contestants, she remembers the contest as a positive experience. However, she admits, "It was a big drawback to have a non-Italian name—Creegan. Some girls [from the lodge] were concerned. We grew up [in the Gulch] with Italians

around us—the people, language and culture. I felt, 'My goodness, I'm not going to win.'"

Not only did she lack an Italian name, her hair colour gave away her half-Irish descent. "I was a redhead," she adds. "That's why I felt like an oddball, not looking as Italian as the others."¹⁰⁴ The atmosphere was noticeably tense when she gave her campaign speech before the men's lodge. She remembers, "Some of the very strong Italian men didn't think I was Italian. They asked, 'Who is this Creegan girl?' But others felt better when they found out who my mother was."¹⁰⁵

In this skeptical and somewhat hostile climate, Creegan delivered a carefully worded speech. "I said, 'Here I am representing the lodge with a non-Italian name, but I'm very proud of my Italian mother and *nonna* (who immigrated to Canada via Ellis Island). I can see the strengths of the Italian community blooming as a flower blooms and why the Colombo Lodge is so important to my family.'"

To these points she added anecdotes from her personal life, including growing up in the Gulch, regular attendance at morning mass, and big Sunday dinners with her Italian relatives. In her venture to become an "Italian" queen she selected particular themes—ethnic origin, childhood in Trail's "Little Italy," respect for older relatives, the importance of family bonds, and the contributions of her family to local Italian religious and social institutions.¹⁰⁶ Creegan's choice to mention her ethnic Italian mother was ideal for a small urban setting, where most in attendance would have known her mother's origins. The strategy was successful: Creegan was nominated the local Italian queen at the Queen's Ball.

Thus, the 1976 Miss Colombo pageant brought two major changes to Italian Trail: the Sisters of Colombo won the dispute over Italian belonging and Laura Creegan was the first girl with a non-Italian father to become Miss Colombo. Looking back on this watershed period, a man who sold tickets for the event figured that "somebody had done some outside work," a comment that falls in line with earlier accusations of intrigue and foul play in the judging process.¹⁰⁷ A former executive at the men's lodge put it differently. He marvelled at the ability of the Italian mothers to carry out their objectives: "If the Sisters wanted something, they got it. The men just had to accept it."¹⁰⁸ His statement dovetails with that of one of the Sisters who coordinated the pageant: "Nothing more came of [the disagreement], except some unhappy members of the men's lodge. The men weren't very happy when they saw that the Colombo Queen's name was Irish. They weren't happy to see the name Creegan. We women said, 'That doesn't matter. She's Italian and that's enough.' We just didn't ask the men [for their opinion]. We asked her to run."¹⁰⁹

A strong argument can be made that the mothers succeeded in the dispute because of historical continuity. By defending their daughters, they were carrying out their role as family custodian. The social belonging of their daughters remained their moral prerogative. On the other hand, the women won the dispute over Italian belonging because the men put them in a position to do so.

The entrance of Italians by maternal lineage into Colombo queen pageants after 1976 made official in lodge discourse a new type of local Italian. Many girls with ethnic Italian mothers and non-Italian fathers followed in Creegan's footsteps, two more taking the crown before

the end of the decade.¹¹⁰ The pageant continued for another nine years, until it was replaced with a scholarship in 1985. Anne Gagliani remembers, "It was getting harder to find girls who were interested in a Queen's Pageant and also it was even harder to find chaperones for these girls. The Colombo [men's] Lodge also became disinterested in this event."¹¹¹ Henceforth, the honour once bestowed on the most "well-rounded" young woman was now given to its brightest young female.

Despite the entrance of maternal half-Italian girls into the Miss Colombo pageant, the Sisters' victory did not bring about an immediate consensus over the local boundaries of Italian belonging. A year after Creegan's victory in 1976, the president of the men's lodge, Sebastiano Nutini, proposed extending membership to those with ethnic Italian mothers and non-Italian fathers. He describes the reaction that followed: "I brought up the idea that we had a lot of Italian young ladies who were probably more Italian than some of the men who were around and were enthusiastic about the culture. Why couldn't their male sons be members of the lodge? It was a very wild idea at that time and it created some wild sessions."¹¹²

Nutini perceived Italian ethnicity as a combination of lineage and familiarity with the culture. It was possible, in his view, for a maternal half-Italian with an appreciation for Italian culture to be "more Italian" than one who carried an Italian surname. This comment parallels the earlier claim by one man that Laura Creegan's non-Italian father was "better than some Italians." In comparison, Nutini did not suggest abandoning lineage, but rather adopting the Sisters' criterion for membership. Nevertheless, both comments indicate a profound rethinking of Italian ethnic belonging. His motion was not passed until 2000. At that time, men with mothers of Italian origin and non-Italian fathers were granted membership, but on the condition they be identified with their mother's Italian maiden name in parentheses, thus preserving a visible connection to Italian lineage.¹¹³

The Colombo Men's Lodge and the Sisters of Colombo carried two very different notions of Italian ethnicity for another twenty-four years after the dispute of 1976. Oddly enough, young hybrid Italian women with non-Italian fathers could become Miss Colombo, but hybrid Italian men with non-Italian fathers could not join the lodge. The Sisters were allowed to select their daughters for the contest, but fathers continued to discourage them from competing. In the end, it was the men who decided if and on what terms the pageant would continue. Though mismanaged and fraught with tensions, it was still *their* event. The Sisters' victory in 1976 was only the first step in a generation-long movement toward a consensus over Italian maternal pedigree. Sebastiano Nutini joked about the long process: "It took the men a little longer [than the women] to get smart."¹¹⁴

Following its cancellation in 1985, the Miss Colombo pageant faded into local memory. In May 2009, however, Lauren Albo, an Italian-Canadian senior from J. L. Crowe Secondary School, asked the men's lodge to sponsor her campaign to become Miss Trail. Albo won the contest. She delivered a speech titled "What I Learned from a Box of Crayons" that expressed in metaphor the benefits of cultural diversity, then played on the piano the theme song from the popular Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, wearing an outfit that, according to the *Trail-Rossland News*, "looked exactly like [the main character of the film] Belle."¹¹⁵ Albo's

victory leads one to postulate that other young Italian women, inspired by her success, will seek sponsorship from the Colombo Lodge for future Miss Trail pageants. The application of more than one candidate would necessitate a runoff for the opportunity to represent the lodge and reopen a forum about Italian femininity closed for a quarter century.

Twenty-five years before Lauren Albo became Miss Trail, the Colombo Lodge queen pageant was the epicentre of a debate about Italian ethnicity in a small city. The event played out against the complex backdrop of demographic, economic, spatial, and cultural changes affecting Italian Trail since the Second World War. The contestants, through their responses to questions at the Queen's Ball and comments in the local newspaper, embodied a small-town Italian population no longer economically and spatially defined, struggling to retain ethnic relevance in the face of sparse immigration and social integration, and now self-identified as ethnic Italian, Canadian, and citizens of Trail. The changes also framed a larger discussion of ethnic boundaries. The crowning of the first queen without an Italian father encapsulated a short period in which the Colombo lodge's notion of Italian ethnicity was dramatically recast, but not overturned. The men's commissioning of women to direct the selection process and the subsequent cancellation of the pageant speaks to the endurance of paternalism in discourses of ethnic belonging. The near-failure of the pageant in 1976 extended the power of female volunteers from suggestion to selection—from the capacity to groom the young contestants and ask them to consider new possibilities for their gender, to the power to *choose* the Italian candidate. Paradoxically, while the Sisters were able to establish themselves in pageant discourse as legitimate bearers of Italian ethnicity to their children, the queen contest remained masculine terrain. Female volunteers altered the ethnic criteria for participation in a paternalistic institution without dismantling its paternalistic structure. Men judged Italian female bodies, picked the winner, and determined whether or not the show would go on.

Notes

1. For the sake of convention and consistency, I will use the term *Italian* to refer generally to those of Italian descent. Where relevant, distinctions will be made for different generations or Italian versus Canadian born.
2. "Colombo Lodge Address," 576-15-8-1, Colombo Lodge Collection (hereafter CLC), Trail City Archives, Trail, BC.
3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 4.
4. Gabriele P. Scardellato, "Beyond the Frozen Wastes: Italian Sojourners and Settlers in British Columbia," in *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigration Experience in Canada*, ed. Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino (Montreal: Guernica, 1989), 135.
5. A few examples include Stanislaw Carbone, *The Streets Were Not Paved with Gold: A Social History of Italians in Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Italian Heritage Committee, 1993); Nicholas De Maria Harney, *Eh Paesan!: Being Italian in Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Laura Quilici, "'I Was a Strong Lady': Italian Housewives with Borders in Vancouver, 1947–1961" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995); Bruno Ramirez, *The Canadian Duce* (Montreal: Guernica, 2006); Patricia K. Wood, *Nationalism from the Margins: Italians in Alberta and British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); and works by Franc Sturino. The scholarship of Robert F. Harney, written largely before the late eighties, has been foundational to later works.

6. Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992). See also the article she co-authored with Karen Dubinsky, "Murder, Womanly Virtue, and Motherhood: The Case of Angelina Napolitano, 1911–22," *Canadian Historical Review* 72 no. 4 (1991): 505–531.
 7. John Zucchi, for example, observed a trend in pre-war Italian Toronto that has been argued elsewhere: for multiple reasons, ethnic identities follow a general pattern from staunch *campanilismo* or hometown loyalties to shared national ethnic solidarities, but never to the dissolution of the former. Robert F. Harney further complicated the debate, charting the rise of post-1970s attachments to Italian regions such as Calabria, Sicily, and Abruzzo, to name a few. John E. Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875–1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 7–8; Robert F. Harney, *From the Shores of Hardship: Italians in Canada*, ed. Nicholas DeMaria Harney (Welland, ON: Soleil, 1993): 105–132.
 8. Jordan Stanger-Ross, "An Inviting Parish: Community without Locality in Postwar Italian Toronto," *Canadian Historical Review* 89 no. 4 (September 2006): 383; and Stanger-Ross, "Italian Markets: Real Estate and Ethnic Community in Toronto and Philadelphia, 1940–1990," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 3 (March 2007): 45.
 9. April R. Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 3, 74–76; and Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta, and Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (1992): 3–41.
 10. He blames the general failure to honour these migrants on *atimia* (self-dish-esteem). Harney, *From the Shores of Hardship*, 10–11.
 11. Trail is officially a city, but given its small population, it is best associated with "towns" of similar size.
 12. "Origins of People by Sub-districts," table 7, 2:170–171; and "Area and Population of Canada by Provinces, Districts, and Sub-districts in 1911 and Population in 1901," table 1, Canada Census (1911), 1:38. Isacco Georgetti, founder of the Montana Hotel, who arrived in 1895, is considered by many to be the first Italian in Trail. Interestingly, Isacco's grandson, Ken, is the current president of the Canadian Labour Congress. Most early migrants came to the South Kootenay Region through channels set up by padroni. See Scardellato, "Beyond the Frozen Wastes," 145–147; and Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
 13. See Stanger-Ross, "An Inviting Parish."
 14. Urban population (incorporated centres with more than 1,000 residents) was 5,572,058; rural population was 4,804,728. In cities with fewer than 30,000 residents there were 2,136,046 people.
- See "Population, Rural and Urban, Census Dates, 1871 to 1976," series A67–69, Canada Census (1931), StatsCan, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/af-fdr.cgi?l=eng&loc=A67_69-eng.csv; "Population in Incorporated Centres of 1,000 Persons and Over, by Size Groups, Census Dates, 1871 to 1976," series A70–74, Canada Census (1931), StatsCan, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/af-fdr.cgi?l=eng&loc=A70_74-eng.csv.
15. Canada Census (1971), StatsCan.
 16. These numbers are 11,580 and 11,149, respectively. "Population of Census Sub-divisions, 1921–1971," table 2, catalogues 92-710–92-712, Canada Census (1971), 2–115.
 17. That is, 275,835 of a total 385,755. "Population by Birth, Place, and Size for Canada and Provinces, Urban Size Groups, Rural Non-Farm and Rural Farm," table 35, catalogues 92-710–92-712, Canada Census (1971), 1.
 18. Harney, *From the Shores of Hardship*, 110–111.
 19. The following figures are for Division 2, which also included roughly two hundred Italians from Castlegar, a city that is not formally considered part of the Trail Region. Statistics from "Population by Origins and Sex, for Counties and Census Divisions," table 34, Canada Census (1951), 1:21–22; "Population by Birthplace and Sex, for Counties and Census Divisions," table 47, Canada Census (1951), 1:23–24; and "Population by Birthplace and Sex, for Counties and Census Divisions," table 51, series 1.2, catalogue 92-547, Canada Census (1961), 25–26.
 20. "Origins of People by Sub-districts," table 7, 2:170–171; and "Area and Population of Canada by Provinces, Districts, and Sub-districts in 1911 and Population in 1901," table 1, Canada Census (1911), 1:38.
 21. "Population by Specified Ethnic Groups by Census Sub-divisions," table 2, SP-4, catalogue 92-774, Canada Census (1971), 121–129. There are no statistics to show the extent of Italian migration to Vancouver, but it is worthy to note that hundreds of former Italian residents of Trail meet there for an annual picnic reunion.
 22. For a collection of short papers on Italian immigrants in small towns, see Rudolph J. Vecoli, ed., *Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America* (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1987).
 23. Eva Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890–1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 218–221.
 24. See Colombo Lodge, <http://www.colombolodge.ca/>. There are two other, but much smaller, pan-Italian clubs in Trail: the Italo-Canadese Lodge (founded in 1934) and Club Italoico (founded in 1954). Most members of the latter are also members of either the Colombo Lodge or Italo-Canadese Lodge.
 25. Although there are no official records to verify this claim, this figure was uniformly stated by all men interviewed in this study.
 26. Lodi Forte, interviewed by author, 1 April 2009.
 27. In 1942, for example, a group of lodge members descending from the northern Italian *commune* of San Martino al Tagliamento (which contains three villages) formed their own club. However, they used the lodge's premises for their meetings and did not abandon their ties to the city's largest Italian association. E. Truant, "Memoirs of San Martino, Italy, and the History of the San Martino Club in Trail, BC" (unpublished, [1983?]), 1. In 1951, more than four hundred Italians in Trail traced their origins to this Italian town, a number that does not include children. This figure is based on registers for the San Martino Club, which have disappeared since being explored by Gabriele P. Scardellato. See "Friulians in Trail, B.C.: Migration and Immigration in the Canadian Periphery," in *An Italian Region in Canada: The Case of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1998), 114. Much of this information is also noted in "The San Martino Club," *Cominco Magazine* (March 1951): 9. There was one another regional club between the 1950s and 1980s—the Grimaldi Club—which consisted of descendants from Calabria, the southernmost region of the Italian peninsula. No archival records exist for this group; however, more than a half-dozen of those interviewed for this study attest to its former existence.
 28. "Trail Is Proud of Its Italian Roots," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 January 2003.
 29. Susan Portz, "Growing up in the Gulch: The Georgetti Family Legacy," *After Ours: Teck Cominco Magazine* 6 (May 2008): 2.
 30. De Maria Harney, *Eh Paesan!*, 129.
 31. Portz, "Growing Up in the Gulch," 2.
 32. Elsie Turnbull, *Trail between the Wars: The Story of a Smelter City* (Victoria, BC: Elsie Turnbull, 1980), 84–85.
 33. *Ibid.*, 50.
 34. Al King, *Red Bait! Struggles of a Mine Mill Local* (Vancouver: King Bird, 1998), 28.
 35. Court Palsson, "Buddy De Vito: An Interview," *Trail Journal of Local History* 1 (Spring 2001): 25–35.
 36. King recalls the only Italian straw boss, Angelo, being fired for taking home

- a company light bulb. Noting that such practice was common, he suggests that Angelo's ethnicity, not his act, precipitated his dismissal. Ibid., 12. In his thesis on Mine Mill Union 480 David Michael Roth finds very few Italian surnames on union registries, despite strong recruitment efforts. Roth, "A Union on the Hill: The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers and the Organization of Trail Smelter and Chemical Workers, 1938–1945" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1991), 49. It is also possible that the lodges voiced complaints on behalf of Italian workers, acting as the unofficial channel for Italian labour advocacy.
37. A similar process took place in Minnesota's iron camps, where Italian workers began to identify themselves as an ethnic group in response to mistreatment at the hands of Anglo-Scandinavian foremen. Rudolph Vecoli, "Italians on Minnesota's Iron Range," in *Italian Immigration in Rural and Small Town America*, ed. R. Vecoli (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 179–198.
 38. "Speech," 975-15-2-1, CLC.
 39. "Trail Is Proud of its Italian Roots," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 January 2003. There are signs of an Italian revival in the Gulch. In the summer of 2007, volunteers from the Colombo Lodge built a large open piazza along Rossland Avenue, where outdoor concerts and social events take place.
 40. Tony Morelli, interviewed by author, 1 April 2009.
 41. See Stephen A. Fielding, "Entertaining Ethnicity: Identity, Place, and the Italian Festival in Vancouver and Trail, British Columbia, 1945–2001" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007), 84–89.
 42. Marc Marcolin, "Colombo Lodge Address," 975-15-2-1, CLC.
 43. An excellent study of turn-of-the-century gender relationships in southern Italy is Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880–1930* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 47–49.
 44. Anne Gagliani, interviewed by author, 10 January 2007.
 45. Allana (Tognotti) Ferro, interviewed by author, 29 April 2009.
 46. Luisa Pellizzari, interviewed by author, 8 January 2007.
 47. V. S., interviewed by author, 10 January 2007, Trail, BC.
 48. F. A., interviewed by author, 8 January 2006, Trail, BC.
 49. One such performance was "Farewell to Youth." Ibid.
 50. Doreen Meschi, interviewed by author, 20 April 2009.
 51. See Stephen Gundle, "Feminine Beauty, National Identity and Political Conflict in Postwar Italy, 1945–1954," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 3 (1999): 359–378.
 52. Ray Culos, *Vancouver's Society of Italians*, vols. 1 and 2 (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1998 and 2002). The Woodbridge case is interesting because it takes place in an upper-middle-class suburb of Toronto, a sign that the queen/beauty pageant has survived the upward social mobility of certain Italians.
 53. This information is gathered from a list of queens mounted on a wall in the Colombo Lodge Archive Room. The first Colombo queen listed in the *Colombo Queens* album is for the year 1934.
 54. Information from *Colombo Lodge: The First 100 Years* (1995), 22; Forte, interview; and Lola Hanlon, interviewed by author, 4 April 2009.
 55. Forte, interview.
 56. During the late 1960s, radical feminists labelled the beauty pageant an instrument of male capitalist supremacy. In one noteworthy case, the New York Radical Women group staged a very public protest at the 1968 Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, NJ. Some chained themselves to a beauty queen mannequin (suggesting female bondage); others dressed up and crowned a sheep (insinuating that contestants are paraded like animals at a livestock auction); and still others sneaked into the ceremony itself and disrupted the event. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 92–101.
 57. Norma Caputo, interviewed by author, 5 April 2009.
 58. Meschi, interview.
 59. Nilla (Cescon) Mailey, interviewed by author, 25 April 2009.
 60. Rhonda (Huth) Manson, interviewed by author, 28 April 2009.
 61. (Tognotti) Ferro, interview.
 62. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 1.
 63. Meschi, interview.
 64. F. A., interview.
 65. "Ballot for Colombo Queen," 198-27-34-1, CLC.
 66. These included the men's installation banquet, Sisters' banquet, a men's meeting, ladies' meeting, and finally, the Queen's Ball. "Ballot for Colombo Lodge Queen Candidate," [1970?], Trail City Archives, Trail, BC.
 67. Caputo, interview.
 68. "Rules for Colombo Queen Contest," [1972?], 476-27-2-1 and 198-27-34-1, CLC; L. T., interviewed by author, 10 January 2007, Trail, BC; (Huth) Manson, interview.
 69. Anne Gagliani, "Reflections and Recollections of Colombo Lodge" (unpublished, 2007).
 70. Patrizia Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf: A History of Beauty Contests in Twentieth-Century Canada" (Ph.D. diss., Queen's University, 2006), 55.
 71. Lavenda, "It's Not a Beauty Pageant!" 40.
 72. Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf," 57.
 73. "Ballot for Colombo Lodge Queen Candidate," ca. 1974, CLC.
 74. An observation also made in Robert H. Lavenda, "It's Not a Beauty Pageant! Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Coleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York: Routledge, 1996), 34.
 75. Banet-Weiser, *Most Beautiful Girl*, 8.
 76. An observation also made by Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain in *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 136–137.
 77. Anne Gagliani, interviewed by author, 2 April 2009.
 78. "Colombo Queen Contests," 198-27-34-1, CLC.
 79. Table 3, vol. 1, catalogue 92-742, Canada Census (1971).
 80. Table 21, series 3.1, catalogue 94-515, Canada Census (1971).
 81. Caputo, interview.
 82. Hanlon, interview.
 83. Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf," 108.
 84. Laura Creegan, interviewed by author, 1 May 2009.
 85. News clipping labelled "1974," *Trail Daily Times*, 198-27-34-1, CLC.
 86. Four local Italian skaters and a manager were members of the latter. Figures based on the surnames of players and coaching staff listed on the 1961 team photo displayed in the Trail Sports Hall of Fame.
 87. Tables 21 and 22, catalogue 94-515, series 3.1, Canada Census (1971), respectively.
 88. There were 352 housekeepers and 269 seamstresses in British Columbia, of a total 1,393 Italian ethnic women in the labour force. Table 22.

The Changing Face of Little Italy

89. Cue cards for speech by Rhonda (Huth) Manson, 1977.
90. Tony Morelli, interviewed by author, 1 April 2007.
91. Meschi, interview.
92. L. T., interview.
93. Ibid.
94. Forte, interview.
95. Colombo Queen Contest Files, 1967–73, file 198-27-34-1, CLC.
96. Nilla (Cescon) Mailey, interviewed by author, 29 April 2009.
97. Untitled, 198-27-34-1, CLC.
98. Gagliani, "Reflections," 24.
99. Ibid., 23–24.
100. Ibid., 25.
101. For a Japanese-American pageant debate over race blood quantum, see chap. 7 of King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty*.
102. Gagliani, interview, 10 January 2007.
103. I. G., interviewed by author, 1 April 2009.
104. Laura Creegan, interviewed by author, 1 May 2009.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid.
107. I. G., interview.
108. F. A., interview.
109. Caputo, interview.
110. "Queens," 476-27-2-1, and "Columbo Queen Contests," 198-27-34-1, CLC; L. T., interviewed by the author, 10 January 2007.
111. Gagliani, "Reflections," 26.
112. Sebastiano Nutini, interviewed by author, 1 April 2009.
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid.
115. "Trail Royalty Crowned," *Trail-Rossland News*, 11 May 2009, http://www.bclocalnews.com/kootenay_rookies/trailrosslandnews/news/44724357.html?period=W&, accessed 30 May 2009.